



# 2022 VIRGINIA NON-TIDAL RIVER FISHING FORECAST



## REGION 2 (SOUTH-CENTRAL VIRGINIA)

### STAUNTON RIVER

Smallmouth Bass fishing in the Staunton River in 2022 should continue to be average to good. While the 2020 year class was poor, better than average year classes produced in 2015, 2017, 2019, and 2021 will maintain consistent catch rates of quality fish for the next several years. Catch rates in fall, electrofishing sampling show population densities for three of the last six sample years above average and among the best catch rates in 23 years (see chart below). The 2016, 2020, and 2021 year classes were poor/average and high rainfall and extreme flows in 2018 likely resulted in few fish added to the fishery that year but the other year classes will compensate for these poor years. Consistent numbers of smallmouth over 16 inches have existed in the Staunton for the last 15 years so anglers still have great opportunities to catch quality fish in this stretch of river. Growth rates of Smallmouth Bass are above average and survival is good which helps the Staunton River be a consistent producer of quality-size smallmouth. The Staunton has excellent Smallmouth Bass habitat in the reach above Brookneal; anglers new to the river should concentrate on the abundant rocky habitat as well as submerged trees extending from the river bank. The river also holds a number of Kentucky Spotted Bass and the chance to catch a spot over 12 inches is very good; especially in the lower river below Brookneal.

**Recent introductions of Alabama Spotted Bass into the system will be closely monitored in the coming years. This species is known to hybridize and outcompete smallmouth populations so we will have to see the fate of the Staunton River Smallmouth Bass population.**

In addition to black bass, anglers in the Staunton River will find fishing for Channel Catfish and Flathead Catfish to be excellent. Catfish are well distributed throughout the river and should be available to anglers fishing from the shore and from boats. A Striped Bass spawning run from Kerr Reservoir also provides a very popular and unique fishing opportunity in April and May. Numerous Striped Bass were also discovered in fall sampling in 2021. Normally the bulk of Striped Bass return to Kerr Reservoir post-spawn but this year several were still using the lower stretches of the river in September and October.

Walleye and Saugeye fishing has really taken off in the Staunton, especially from Leesville dam to Altavista. Quality Walleye are now consistently being caught and sampled all the way to Brookneal. A tag reward study began in 2020 and will continue through 2022 to assess the extent of angler exploitation of the Walleye/Saugeye fishery. Look for signs posted at public fishing ramps for additional information and return the tags if you are lucky enough to catch a

tagged fish. It is very important information that will benefit the fishery! Please return tags to:

VDWR - Reward Program

107 Foxwood Drive

Farmville, VA 23901

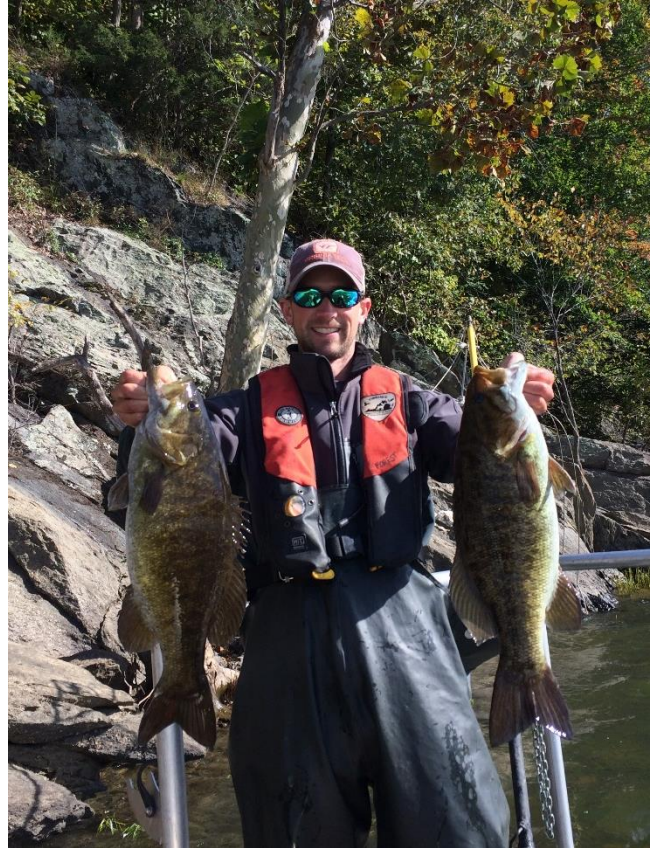
In 2020, 260 Walleye and 40 Saugeye were tagged for a total of 300 reward tags. Of those 300, 50 were released into Leesville Lake to determine fishing pressure in the Lake. 16-18 inch Walleye dominated the catch in 2020 and 2021 so anglers can expect a high density of legal fish in the river. Thirty tags were returned in 2020 for an exploitation or catch rate of 10% (corrected to 15% due to non-reporting bias). Again in 2021, 300 additional tags were placed in Walleye (290) and Saugeye (10) with 50 again going into Leesville Lake. Forty tags were returned in 2021 for an exploitation rate of 13% (corrected to 19% due to non-reporting bias). These initial results indicate that this is a developing fishery that has seen an increase in effort in the two years of the study. Tagging will commence and likely conclude winter 2022 with a goal of 300 additional fish being tagged in the river. This third year of the study will reveal if the fishery continues to expand to new anglers.



*Quality Saugeye collected and tagged in winter 2022 Electrofishing samples on the Staunton River.*

## UPPER JAMES RIVER

Anglers can continue expect reduced numbers of smallmouth bass in most areas of the upper James River (Iron Gate to Lynchburg) in 2022. Poor recruitment of young fish to the fishery from 2016-2020 has led to an overall decrease in smallmouth bass abundance. However, 2021 appears to have been a good recruitment years. In fall 2021, 1,133 smallmouth bass were collected using electrofishing gear with approximately 86% of those bass measuring 12 inches or less. With more small fish around to be caught anglers should notice a slight improvement in bass numbers caught, but it will not be like the years gone by when anglers could catch bass until they had their fill. Spawning success for smallmouth was below average for the 2016-2020 period, leading to reduced numbers of bass less than 12 inches. Anglers can expect to see some fish larger than 12 inches as they continue to persist from good year classes six to ten years ago in most areas. Approximately 6% of the smallmouth bass collected were 14 inches or greater and therefore protected under the current slot limit regulations. Recreational usage of the upper James has become extremely popular. Anglers specifically targeting smallmouth bass should consider fishing in less frequented sections of river.



*Quality Smallmouth Bass collected in fall 2021  
Electrofishing samples on the Upper James River.*

Numbers of muskellunge continues to be good (slightly increasing during the past ten years) and are found primarily upstream of Lynchburg. There are now adequate musky to provide a relatively good chance of a hookup. Muskies can be very picky so anglers often use a variety of baits throughout the year including large crankbaits, spinnerbaits, tubes, and swimbaits.

The upper James is also home to variety of sunfish including Rock Bass, Redbreast, and Bluegill. Sunfish numbers are slightly higher than previous years with the majority of fish ranging from 5 to 7 inches in length. Although often over looked, angling for sunfish can provide great entertainment especially using light tackle or fly-fishing. As for catfish in the upper James, channel and flathead catfish numbers should be similar to previous years—plentiful in places but not consistently abundant river-wide.



## MIDDLE JAMES RIVER

Smallmouth Bass numbers in the middle James River (Bent Creek to Watkin's Landing) have declined fairly steadily in recent years. Fall 2021 electrofishing samples revealed some signs of improvement. A total of 443 Smallmouth Bass were collected in 2021, with 92% of those fish measuring less than 12 inches. Fall 2021 samples revealed good numbers of 1-year old



*A quality Smallmouth Bass caught by hook and line in the Middle James River in fall 2021.*

Smallmouth Bass, approximately 8-9 inches in length. These fish will reach catchable size in 2022 and should provide anglers some action throughout the middle river over the next several years. Additionally, low Smallmouth Bass abundances appear to have increased growth rates. The fish that remain in the middle river are growing very quickly and should provide the opportunity to catch quality fish in the years to come.

**Recent detections of Alabama Bass in the tidal James River and a single detection in the fall-line James River indicate an increased potential for illegal introductions into the middle James River. Alabama Bass are known to hybridize with and outcompete Smallmouth Bass populations and pose a serious threat to the future of the fishery.**

The middle James also provides anglers the opportunity to catch several sunfish species, including: Bluegill, Redbreast Sunfish, Redear Sunfish, and Rock Bass. Sunfish numbers are lower than previous years with the majority of fish ranging from 4 to 6 inches in length. These fish can provide good action for anglers, particularly on lighter tackle.

Numbers of both Channel and Flathead Catfish have continued to increase throughout the middle James River. Additionally, Blue Catfish abundances are slowly increasing in the middle river as well, particularly in downstream reaches.

## REGION 3 (SOUTHWEST VIRGINIA)

### UPPER NEW RIVER

On the New River upstream from Claytor Lake (Upper New River), Smallmouth Bass spawning success has been consistently poor since 2014 due to high water in the spring months. With that said, a bright future is dawning since the 2019 Smallmouth Bass year class from Fries Dam to Allisonia is the best spawn documented by New River fisheries biologists in sampling since 2000. Upstream from Fries Dam, the 2019 Smallmouth Bass spawn was average, but will still provide bass for anglers to catch in the coming years. Until the Smallmouth Bass hatched in 2019 grow to adult sizes during 2022, angler catches will mostly be Smallmouth Bass from 7 to 11 inches, with occasional catches of larger Smallmouth Bass from the abundant spawns in 2012 and 2014. The section from Buck Dam to Allisonia is the best area of the Upper New River for Smallmouth Bass fishing.

Walleye fishing is best from Fries Dam to Allisonia where the Department concentrates its stocking efforts. Anglers catch good numbers of Walleye in this section from February to May, with Foster Falls a prime location. Rock Bass and Redbreast Sunfish provide fun fishing opportunities, particularly from Mouth of Wilson to Fries where these sunfish are more numerous. In pool areas from Ivanhoe to Allisonia, anglers can catch Channel and Flathead Catfish, which are more numerous upstream from Claytor Lake than they are downstream from the lake. Muskie populations have increased from Ivanhoe to Allisonia, offering opportunities to catch a trophy that will light up your lure!



*The Upper New River near Galax, VA.*

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## LOWER NEW RIVER

Like the New River upstream from Claytor Lake, Smallmouth Bass spawning success on the lower New River below Claytor Lake has been poor since 2014, although the 2016 year class was slightly above average. As a result, angler catches in 2021 will primarily be 7 to 12 inch Smallmouth Bass, with occasional catches of larger ones from the good spawns in 2010, 2012, and 2014. Top locations for Smallmouth Bass are Whitethorne to Eggleston in Montgomery and Giles counties and Pembroke to Pearisburg in Giles County. Good areas for panfish include Claytor Dam and Whitethorne in Montgomery County and Pembroke to Pearisburg in Giles County. If you prefer catching big fish, increase the size of your gear and target Musky. Throwing large spinnerbaits and stick baits could result in hair-raising strikes.

## NORTH FORK HOLSTON RIVER

Anglers should experience some good fishing on the North Fork Holston River in 2022. Previous sampling efforts have revealed a strong year class spawned in 2019 that is contributing significantly to the adult Smallmouth Bass population. On average, about 50% of the adult fish in the North Fork Holston River are 11 inches or longer and more than 25% exceed 14 inches. Memorable-sized ( $\geq 17$  inches) typically account for about 5% of the adult Smallmouth Bass population. Rock Bass, Redbreast Sunfish, and Channel Catfish also provide great fishing opportunities for anglers wanting to give this river a try.

## CLINCH RIVER

The Clinch River routinely offers good fishing opportunities for Smallmouth Bass and should continue to do so in 2022. The river was not sampled in 2020 or 2021, but previous sampling efforts indicated a strong 2018 year class that will continue to contribute to the adult Smallmouth Bass population in the coming year. The Smallmouth Bass population typically has about 40% of the adults measuring 11 inches or longer and 15% exceeding 14 inches. Fish measuring 17 inches or more usually account for 3-5% of the adult population. The catch rates of adult Rock Bass have been down in recent years, but are still available in numbers sufficient to provide good angling action. Redbreast Sunfish, Channel Catfish, Flathead Catfish, Walleye, and Musky provide great fishing prospects as well.



*A quality Walleye caught by rod and reel in the Clinch River in 2021.*



## REGION 4 (NORTHERN VIRGINIA)

### RAPPAHANNOCK AND RAPIDAN RIVERS

Fishing for Smallmouth Bass on the upper (above Fredericksburg) Rappahannock and Rapidan Rivers in 2022 should be better than last year. Like most rivers in eastern and central Virginia, high water during late spring in many recent years has resulted in poor spawning success, and consequently Smallmouth Bass abundance was near a record low in 2020. The most recent years with good recruitment were 2014-2016 and 2021. The good news is the fish are out there on the larger side, so it's a good time for citation hunting. The Largemouth Bass population has been expanding, and their numbers are strong on the slower stretches especially where Hydrilla is present. Snakeheads can be found in these same slower, vegetated habitats; so weedless baits (soft plastics in spring, and topwater in summer) are a good choice. Look for snakeheads to stack up below Rapidan Mill Dam in mid-April through early May before they drop back from their pre-spawn migration. The rivers are full of perfect eating-size Channel Catfish which have colonized the upper watershed since Embrey Dam came down. Yellow Perch, White Perch and Striped Bass can now also be found far above Fredericksburg with migration barriers gone.

### NORTH FORK SHENANDOAH RIVER

Consistent spawning success should aid in improving the Smallmouth Bass population in the North Fork Shenandoah over the next few years. During our 2021 spring raft sampling we collected 318 Smallmouth Bass within three 6 mile floats located within the upper, middle, and lower sections of the North Fork. About 33% of the smallmouth were 11" or greater with 14% topping 14". We caught low numbers of memorable fish with only 5% measuring 17" plus.

In 2018 the North Fork Shenandoah experienced long-term record flows which may have had a negative impact on the fish community. In the 2019 and 2020 spring raft sample Smallmouth Bass numbers were much lower than the 2018 sample. The good news is our catch rate of juvenile fish (<7") has been reaching the historical average the last two years, which is driving the population's slow but steady recovery. Also, our total catch rate has doubled since we hit a historical low in the spring of 2019. If you break down the numbers by reach, anglers can expect higher numbers of smaller fish within the upper (New Market - Mount

Jackson) and lower (Deer Rapids - Strasburg) reaches of the river. For those that prefer larger



*Smallmouth Bass collected during 2021 raft electrofishing sampling on the North Fork Shenandoah River*

fish try the middle reaches (Woodstock), overall numbers are lower but some quality fish are still cruising the ledges. Within the next 3-4 years anglers should see the population recover as long as the bass continue to experience spawning success.

The North Fork has more than just Smallmouth to offer our avid anglers. Fallfish are plentiful in some sections of the North Fork, can exceed 14 inches, and should not be overlooked. Anglers may also encounter fair numbers of Redbreast Sunfish in most areas, Bluegill in deeper pools, and the opportunity to catch a quality-sized Largemouth Bass, Channel Catfish, or the occasional Musky. Pool habitat is limited, so seek out deeper water when targeting these species. If you plan a float trip here; stick to spring and early summer, as low flows and possible dense vegetation can make fishing and navigation difficult later in the year.

### SOUTH FORK SHENANDOAH RIVER

The South Fork Shenandoah River is known by anglers as a “numbers” fishery, meaning anglers can expect to catch a reasonable amount of bass and sunfish on any given day. During our 2021 fall sampling we collected 1,192 Smallmouth Bass from nine sampling sites. About 19% were 11” or greater with only 6% topping 14”. We found low numbers of memorable fish with only 1% measuring 17” plus. Overall our sample yielded high numbers of smaller fish, with a majority falling short of the 11” mark. This is pretty typical for the



*A quality Smallmouth Bass collected during 2021  
Electrofishing surveys on the South Fork Shenandoah River*

South Fork, fantastic catch rates with low numbers of quality sized fish. Anglers can expect to catch high numbers of 7-10” fish. Currently there are several strong year classes recruiting into the smallmouth fishery (2014, 2015, and 2019). Typically this results in above average catch rates of quality sized bass within the system. We saw a slight dip in the number of quality fish present after the high water year of 2018, however anglers can expect above average catch rates of fish over 11” during the upcoming season. The South Fork has had its fair share of struggles over the years with fish health problems, but by in large the fishing on the Shenandoah should be excellent in the coming years.

Largemouth Bass also present quality opportunities for anglers, as this river harbors a quality population. Finding 2 to 4 pound fish should not be difficult in deeper, slower sections when woody debris are targeted. Overall, 69% of our sample contained quality sized fish (>12”) with a majority falling into the 12-17” size range. The Shenandoah River is a sleeper largemouth fishery for quality bass. Our heaviest fish weighed in at 6.4lbs. Although there has



been a reduction in overall numbers of largemouth, anglers can expect an increase in the number of 15-20" bass in the coming years.

There is also the opportunity to catch Musky in the longer and deeper pools. VDWR periodically stocks fingerling-size musky on the South Fork Shenandoah River at 15 sites stretching from Port Republic to Front Royal. It was last stocked in the fall of 2021 with 453 advanced fingerling musky (approximately 8"). There has been limited evidence of muskies reproducing naturally in the South Fork, therefore they must be stocked to sustain a fishery. Musky are stocked to increase diversity to the fishery and provide a challenging trophy fish for anglers to target. Adult musky densities are not as high as some of the other rivers in the state due to the lack of consistent pool habitats. However, when you come across a pool on the South Fork, anglers have a good opportunity to come in contact with one.

Our biologists and technicians typically sample the river for musky in January or February. They sample 4 sites using three electrofishing boats. During the last sampling event in early 2021 they collected a total of 36 fish with a majority falling in the 36 - 44" range, which is typical for the South Fork. Anglers should be pleased with the current population level. Overall numbers were similar to previous samples and the number of quality fish are above average, with many musky measuring 40" or greater. Anglers will notice that there are younger year classes missing from the population as a result of poor spawns caused by higher than normal flows and skipped stockings. In the next few years, we may see a dip in overall numbers as some fish age out of the population. However, we should see a good number of young fish in the coming years. The river received repetitive stockings in 2018, 2020, and 2021. This is a good sign for the future. Musky grow fast in Virginia, with females reaching citation size (40") in 5-6 years.



*DWR staff measure a Musky collected during 2021 Electrofishing surveys on the South Fork Shenandoah River.*

To learn how to fish for musky, please visit: [dwr.virginia.gov/wildlife/fish/muskellunge/](https://dwr.virginia.gov/wildlife/fish/muskellunge/)

Channel Catfish in the 2 to 6 pound range are common, and anglers should concentrate on the lower South Fork. Don't be surprised if you catch quality-sized Redbreast Sunfish, Pumpkinseed, Bluegill, Green Sunfish, Fallfish, or Black Crappie.

## MAINSTEM SHENANDOAH RIVER

Anglers can expect reduced numbers of bass on the Main Stem Shenandoah. During our 2021 fall sampling we collected 90 Smallmouth Bass from three sites. About 43% were 11" or greater with 7% topping 14". We found low numbers of memorable fish with only 2% measuring 17" plus. The Main Stem suffers from similar inconsistent fish health issues much like the South Fork as well as low spawning success, which prohibits a prompt population recovery. The last quality spawn occurred in 2014 which explains why anglers will experience low numbers of fish overall. The good news is, that same year class is providing anglers with decent chance of catching a quality sized bass. Hopefully in the coming years we will experience some better spawning success to help boost the population.

Largemouth Bass present quality opportunities for anglers, as this river historically harbored a quality population. Finding 2 to 4 pound fish is not uncommon in deeper, slower sections with woody debris. During our 2021 sample 70% of the Largemouth collected were 12" plus. Much like the smallmouth, the bucket-mouth population has also experienced a downturn. However, the 2021 sample showed a slight increase in overall numbers and quality.

Anglers also have the opportunity to catch Musky in the longer and deeper pools. VDWR periodically stocks fingerling-size musky on the Main Stem Shenandoah River at 8 sites stretching from Warren Dam to the route 7 bridge. It was last stocked in the fall of 2021 with 226 advanced fingerling musky (approximately 8"). There has been limited evidence of muskies reproducing naturally in the Main Stem, therefore they must be stocked to sustain a fishery. Musky are stocked to increase diversity to the fishery and provide a challenging trophy fish for anglers to target. Adult musky densities are not as high as some of the other rivers in the state due to the lack of consistent pool habitats. However, when you come across a pool on the Main Stem, anglers have a good opportunity to come in contact with one. Catch rates on the Main Stem have been greatly reduced compared to historical reports. This river needs consistent stocking for the musky population to thrive. Anglers can expect to catch a majority of the fish within the 38-45" range with very few younger fish. Luckily, we have received fish to stock in 2018, 2020, and 2021. Anglers should start to see these fish recruiting to the population in the coming years.

One bright spot for the Main Stem is the up and coming Walleye fishery. In the spring of 2014, DWR began stocking Walleye fry in the



*A quality Walleye collected during 2021 Electrofishing surveys on the South Fork Shenandoah River.*

Shenandoah River annually to supplement the natural population and increase the number of Walleye present. The river has received stockings since the start of the project and the population appears strong. Anglers should continue to experience increased catch rates and better numbers of big Walleye in 2022. During January in early 2021 we sampled one site and collected 43 walleye. 81% of sample measured 20 inches or greater with largest fish reaching 29 inches and weighing in at 10.9lbs. As future annual stockings are added to the Shenandoah River, the population should continue to grow into a respectable fishery. Anglers fishing for Walleye on the Shenandoah River should focus their efforts in the deeper pools during daylight hours. Walleye will move out of the deeper pools into shallow bedrock ledge areas to feed at night.



## MAURY RIVER

Fishing the Maury River in beautiful Rockbridge County is always a good choice. Fish populations are extremely consistent from year to year, and anglers should expect high catch rates of Smallmouth Bass, Rock Bass, and Redbreast Sunfish when fishing in 2022. DWR data shows an increasing trend in quality-size smallies over the past few years. The Maury offers excellent habitat for smallmouth bass and sunfish throughout its 30-mile journey to the James River in Glasgow. Anglers may also find themselves “reeling in” a Green Sunfish, Pumpkinseed or Fallfish, as these species are also common. Harboring high densities of scrappy fish, the Maury is a great place to take novice anglers or a child on their first fishing trip. Great fishing can be found throughout the Maury River, but higher densities of fish and more quality-size Smallmouth Bass, is the trend from Lexington downstream to Glasgow. New for 2022! Check out the updated Maury River Float Guide Map on the DWR website when planning your next fishing trip.

<https://dwr.virginia.gov/waterbody/maury-river/#maps>



*Quality Smallmouth Bass collected during 2020 raft electrofishing samples on the Maury River.*

*For more information on non-tidal river fishing in Virginia, contact the following regional offices:*

- *Staunton River and Middle James River: Farmville Office (434) 392-9645*
- *Upper James River: Forest Office (434) 525-7522*
- *New, Clinch, and North Fork Holston Rivers: Marion Office (276) 783-4860*
- *Rappahannock and Rapidan Rivers: Fredericksburg Office (540) 889-4169*
- *Shenandoah and Maury River: Verona Office (540)248-9360*